

Evaluation of the Peer Relationships of Inclusive Students Participating in Physical Education and Play Classes by Teachers

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the peer relationships of students with special educational needs who participate in physical education and play classes. The Teacher Form of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course was used as the data collection instrument. The study group consisted of 116 teachers (56 female and 60 male). Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 46 years (Group 1: 22-27; Group 2: 28-33; Group 3: 34-39; Group 4: 40-45; Group 5: 46 years and above). The sample included 80 married teachers (Group 1) and 36 single teachers (Group 2). Independent samples t-test and one-way ANOVA were used for data analysis. The findings indicated no significant differences in peer rejection scores in the Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course according to gender, age, or marital status. However, a significant difference was found in the "problematic behaviors" sub-dimension based on the number of years teachers had worked at their current school. A significant difference was also found in the "physical appearance" sub-dimension according to the grade level taught by teachers. Furthermore, a significant difference was identified in the "speech skills" sub-dimension according to the number of students with special needs...

Keywords: Physical Education and Play Course, Primary School, Child, Inclusive Classroom, Peer Rejection, Teacher Opinions..

INTRODUCTION

In this study, the peer relationships of students with special educational needs and whether they experience peer rejection during participation in physical education and play classes-courses considered among the most enjoyable parts of the educational process will be examined based on teachers' observations. The study was designed around students with special educational needs participating in these classes, as such activities are thought to be occasions when students feel they are part of a team, interact positively with one another, engage in social communication, and experience the lowest levels of peer rejection. Through this research, extensive information will be gathered from teachers employed by the Ministry of National Education regarding peer relationships between inclusive students and their typically developing peers. The findings will then be evaluated and shared with teachers. In this way, teachers will gain a broader understanding of the causes and circumstances of peer rejection experienced by students with special educational needs. Such knowledge is expected to contribute to the development of these students' social skills and social behaviors. Furthermore,.

preventing peer rejection and promoting social integration with peers are considered important for reducing negative social behaviors among students with special educational needs

One of the fundamental principles underlying inclusive education is the principle of diversity and inclusion. Effective inclusion aims to develop educational systems that address the needs of all students regardless of learning abilities, race, language skills, economic status, gender, learning style, ethnic characteristics, cultural background, religion, or family structure. In schools implementing inclusive education, all students have the opportunity to learn, play, and participate together in educational, social, and developmental activities. Such inclusive practices not only increase peer acceptance but also reinforce equality, cooperation, respect for individual needs and differences, understanding, and tolerance (Akçamete, 2012).

In light of this information, positive and negative interactions among peers, which directly or indirectly affect all areas of development, may lead to different types of relationships. Peer rejection is one such relationship type. Peer rejection refers to a negative form of social interaction that includes behaviors such as exclusion from the group, damaging relationships, exerting social pressure, socially isolating the targeted individual, excluding them from games and activities, and avoiding friendship formation (Mrug et al., 2012). Individuals who engage in peer rejection are often characterized as aggressive, quarrelsome, disruptive, possessing low self-esteem, low social competence, and poor social skills. These individuals typically have few friends and may themselves be rejected by peers as a consequence of their own negative behaviors (Menteş & Arnas, 2021). Peer rejection can have several short-term negative effects on students with special educational needs, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, low self-confidence, embarrassment, difficulties in forming close friendships, having a limited number of friends, avoidance of activities, academic failure, low social competence, and aggressive behaviors. If timely intervention is not provided for either the student experiencing peer rejection or the student causing it, peer rejection may also result in long-term and potentially permanent adverse consequences (Ogelman & Sarıkaya, 2016).

Previous studies conducted in inclusive educational settings have shown that typically developing children often do not want to include children with special needs in their games and may label them negatively (Çulhaoğlu-İmrak & Sığirtmaç, 2010; Küçük-Doğaroğlu & Bapoğlu-Dümenci, 2015; Abbak, 2019). One of the most effective methods for preventing the rejection of students with special educational needs is increasing their participation in games, sports, and physical activities (Demirci & Demirci, 2014; Yaman, 2015). Physical Education and Play courses inherently involve excitement, enthusiasm, and movement-based activities such as running, jumping, hopping, and skipping, as well as individual and group games. Therefore, these courses possess significant potential for promoting the social integration of students with special educational needs. Games, sports, and physical activities provide enjoyable environments in which individuals can express their thoughts and feelings freely while developing social relationships. Through participation in these activities, students not only enjoy themselves but also gain opportunities to share their emotions, experiences, and ideas with peers (Alarслан, 2019). For this reason, such activities are among the most suitable environments for students with special educational needs to interact and communicate with their peers without being exposed to peer rejection. Moreover, interactions that occur during participation in games, sports, and physical activities significantly contribute to the development of social skills and positive social behaviors among students with special educational needs (Yılmaz & Soyer, 2018). Consequently, Physical Education and Play courses facilitate opportunities for students with special educational needs to come together with their peers, engage in social interaction and communication, and share emotions and experiences. In doing so, these courses play an important role in reducing peer rejection. By bringing together students with special educational needs and their typically developing peers, physical education and play activities effectively support the goals of inclusive education (Gün & İlkin, 2020).

The present study examined, based on teachers' opinions, whether students attending inclusive classrooms in primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education and participating in Physical Education and Play courses are exposed to peer rejection. To collect the necessary data, two instruments were utilized: the Teacher Information Form, developed by the researchers, and the

Teacher Form of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR) developed by Han et al. (2022). The target population of the study consisted of primary school teachers working in inclusive classrooms in public primary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education in the province of Çorum, Türkiye. Peer relationships among students were evaluated through teachers' observations during participation in games, sports, and physical activities, which are considered enjoyable contexts in which students interact socially, communicate effectively, and experience the lowest levels of peer rejection. These activities are also regarded as settings where students with special educational needs are least likely to encounter peer rejection throughout their educational experiences. Therefore, teachers' observations during such activities were used to determine the nature of peer relationships among students.

Findings

Table 1. Results of the Normality Tests for Data Distribution

Variables	Shapiro-Wilk			$\bar{X}$	Median	Skewness	Kurtosis
	Statistic	sd	p				
ÖSFEDAR	0,067	0,860	0,001	2,364	2,364	-0,056	-1,026
Physical Appearance Sub-dimension	0,16	0,927	0,00	2,030	2	0,614	-0,596
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	0,132	0,906	0,00	2,183	2	0,39	-0,778
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	0,185	1,372	0,00	3,002	3,3	-0,183	-1,518
Social Skills Sub-dimension	0,094	0,908	0,00	2,285	2,2	0,224	-0,815

According to the results of the normality analysis, the proximity of the mean and median values, together with the requirement that skewness and kurtosis coefficients fall within the range of ± 2 , were examined. Based on the findings of the study, all values were found to satisfy the assumptions of normal distribution (George & Mallery, 2010). Consequently, the data were considered suitable for parametric statistical analyses.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Teachers Participating in the Study

Gender	n	%
Female	56	48,3
Male	60	51,7
Age	n	%
22-27 years (Group 1)	22	19
28-33 years (Group 2)	17	14,7
34-39 years (Group 3)	23	19,8
40-45 years (Group 4)	30	25,9
46 years and above (Group 5)	24	20,7
Marital Status	n	%
Married (Group 1)	80	69,0

Single (Group 2)	36	31,0
Years of Service at the Current School	n	%
1-3 years (Group 1)	41	35,3
4-7 years (Group 2)	38	32,8
8 years and above (Group 3)	37	31,9
Grade Level Taught	n	%
Grade 1 (Group 1)	20	17,2
Grade 2 (Group 2)	21	18,1
Grade 3 (Group 3)	23	19,8
Grade 4 (Group 4)	52	44,8
Total	116	100.0

When the distribution of the demographic characteristics of the teachers participating in the study was examined, the study group was found to consist of 116 teachers, including 56 females and 60 males. The participants were categorized into five age groups: Group 1 comprised teachers aged 22–27 years ($n = 22$), Group 2 included those aged 28–33 years ($n = 17$), Group 3 consisted of teachers aged 34–39 years ($n = 23$), Group 4 included teachers aged 40–45 years ($n = 30$), and Group 5 comprised teachers aged 46 years and above ($n = 24$). With respect to marital status, 80 participants were married (Group 1) and 36 were single (Group 2). Regarding years of service at their current school, Group 1 consisted of teachers with 1–3 years of service ($n = 41$), Group 2 included those with 4–7 years of service ($n = 38$), and Group 3 comprised teachers with 8 years or more of service ($n = 37$).

Table 3 presents the findings regarding the mean and standard deviation values of the 22 items included in the four sub-dimensions of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course-Teacher Form

Observed Variables	$\bar{X}$	SD
Physical Appearance		
The student is rejected because of his/her teeth.	1,83	0,926
The student is rejected because of his/her hair.	1,71	0,824
The student is rejected because of his/her weight.	2,34	1,333
The student is rejected because of the structure of his/her arms and legs.	2,24	1,303
Speech Skills		
The student is rejected because of difficulties in speech articulation (lispings).	1,91	0,992
The student is rejected because of speech disfluencies (stuttering).	2,03	1,091
The student is rejected because of a different tone of voice (e.g., sounding nasal).	1,93	1,109
The student is rejected because he/she speaks very loudly.	2,21	1,22
The student is rejected because he/she makes unusual sounds.	2,53	1,335
The student is rejected because he/she talks about irrelevant topics.	2,24	1,162

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The student is rejected because he/she talks excessively.	2,3	1,21
The student is rejected because he/she cannot respond verbally to peers.	2,32	1,269
Problematic Behaviors		
The student is rejected because he/she bites peers.	2,73	1,523
The student is rejected because he/she does not wait for his/her turn.	2,93	1,343
The student is rejected because he/she hits others.	3,16	1,56
The student is rejected because he/she spits at others.	3,07	1,559
The student is rejected because he/she does not follow rules.	3,11	1,531
Social Skills		
The student is rejected because of a lack of game-playing skills.	2,36	1,212
The student is rejected because of a lack of ability to initiate conversations.	2,25	1,037
The student is rejected because he/she cannot maintain eye contact.	1,97	0,894
The student is rejected because he/she does not listen carefully when peers speak to him/her.	2,37	1,169
The student is rejected because he/she behaves indifferently toward peers.	2,47	1,146
Total	52,01	26,748

An examination of the descriptive statistics of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course presented in Table 3 revealed that teachers perceived the overall level of peer rejection during play, sports, and physical activity classes to be relatively high ($\bar{X}=52.01$). Among the scale items, the statement with the highest mean score was "The student is rejected because he/she hits others" ($\bar{X}=3.16$), indicating that aggressive behavior was perceived as the most prominent reason for peer rejection. Conversely, the statement with the lowest mean score was "The student is rejected because of his/her hair" ($\bar{X}=1.71$), suggesting that physical appearance-related factors were perceived as less influential in peer rejection compared to behavioral factors.

Table 4. Results of the Analysis of Differences in Teachers' Levels of Agreement with the Scale Sub-Dimensions According to Gender

Variables	Group	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	df	p
ÖSFEDAR	Female	56	2,41	0,13	0,535	114	0,594
	Male	60	2,32	0,10			
Physical Appearance Sub-dimension	Female	56	2,06	0,13	0,312		0,756
	Male	60	2,00	0,11			
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	Female	56	2,25	0,13	0,74		0,461
	Male	60	2,12	0,11			
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	Female	56	3,05	0,20	0,365		0,716
	Male	60	2,96	0,16			
Social Skills Sub-dimension	Female	56	2,31	0,13	0,259		0,796
	Male	60	2,26	0,11			
*p< .05							

The scores obtained from the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR), including the total scale score and the sub-dimensions assessing peer rejection due to physical appearance, speech skills, problematic behaviors, and social skills, were analyzed using an independent samples t-test to determine whether they differed according to teachers' gender. The results are presented in Table 4. The findings revealed that neither the ÖSFEDAR score nor the scores obtained from any of its sub-dimensions differed significantly according to gender ($p > .05$).

Table 5. Results of the Analysis of Differences in Teachers' Levels of Agreement with the Scale Sub-Dimensions According to Age

Variables	Age Group	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	F	p
ÖSFEDAR	22-27 years	22	2,20	1,02	0,277	0,892
	28-33 years	17	2,43	0,87		
	34-39 years	23	2,34	0,81		
	40-45 years	30	2,43	0,88		
	46 years and above	24	2,41	0,76		
Physical Appearance Sub-dimension	22-27 years	22	2,08	1,10	0,452	0,770
	28-33 years	17	2,28	1,00		
	34-39 years	23	1,98	0,84		
	40-45 years	30	1,99	0,96		
	46 years and above	24	1,91	0,76		
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	22-27 years	22	2,03	0,94	0,373	0,827
	28-33 years	17	2,27	0,84		
	34-39 years	23	2,18	0,82		
	40-45 years	30	2,13	1,03		
	46 years and above	24	2,33	0,88		
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	22-27 years	22	2,54	1,42	1,048	0,386
	28-33 years	17	3,09	1,44		
	34-39 years	23	2,90	1,40		
	40-45 years	30	3,29	1,30		
	46 years and above	24	3,09	1,33		
Social Skills Sub-dimension	22-27 years	22	2,25	1,07	0,233	0,919
	28-33 years	17	2,15	0,67		
	34-39 years	23	2,31	0,88		
	40-45 years	30	2,40	1,00		
	46 years and above	24	2,24	0,86		
Total		116				
*p< .05						

The scores obtained from the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR), including the total scale score and the sub-dimensions assessing peer rejection due to physical appearance, speech skills, problematic behaviors, and social skills, were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether they differed according to teachers' age groups. The results are presented in Table 5. The findings indicated that neither the total ÖSFEDAR score nor the scores obtained from any of its sub-dimensions differed significantly across age groups ($p > .05$).

Table 6. Results of the Analysis of Differences in Teachers' Levels of Agreement with the Scale Sub-Dimensions According to Marital Status

Variables	Group	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	t	df	p
ÖSFEDAR	Married	80	2,39	0,83	0,567	114	0,572
	Single	36	2,30	0,94			
Physical Appearance Sub-dimension	Married	80	2,03	0,90	-0,035		0,972
	Single	36	2,03	1,00			
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	Married	80	2,23	0,92	0,795		0,428
	Single	36	2,08	0,88			
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	Married	80	3,08	1,38	0,945		0,347
	Single	36	2,82	1,36			
Social Skills Sub-dimension	Married	80	2,27	0,89	-0,299		0,766
	Single	36	2,32	0,96			
*p< .05							

The scores obtained from the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR), including the total scale score and the sub-dimensions assessing peer rejection due to physical appearance, speech skills, problematic behaviors, and social skills, were analyzed using an independent samples t-test to determine whether they differed according to teachers' marital status. The results are presented in Table 6. The findings revealed that neither the total ÖSFEDAR score nor the scores obtained from any of its sub-dimensions differed significantly according to marital status ($p > .05$).

Table 7. Results of the Analysis of Differences in Teachers' Levels of Agreement with the Scale Sub-Dimensions According to Years of Service at Their Current School

Variables	Group	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	F	p	Gabriel
ÖSFEDAR	1-3 years	41	2,16	0,92	2,025	0,137	
	4-7 years	38	2,53	0,74			
	8 years and above	37	2,42	0,88			
Physical Appearance Sub-dimension	1-3 years	41	1,93	0,96	0,818	0,444	
	4-7 years	38	2,18	0,97			
	8 years and above	37	1,99	0,84			
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	1-3 years	41	1,98	0,92	1,673	0,192	

	4-7 years	38	2,27	0,85			1-2	
	8 years and above	37	2,32	0,94				
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	1-3 years	41	2,60	1,40	3,346	0,039*		
	4-7 years	38	3,38	1,23				
	8 years and above	37	3,05	1,39				
Social Skills Sub-dimension	1-3 years	41	2,19	0,94	0,52	0,596		
	4-7 years	38	2,39	0,82				
	8 years and above	37	2,28	0,97				
Total	116							
*p< .05								

The scores obtained from the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR), including the total scale score and the sub-dimensions assessing peer rejection due to physical appearance, speech skills, problematic behaviors, and social skills, were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether they differed according to the number of years teachers had worked at their current school. The results are presented in Table 7. The findings revealed that teachers' scores on the Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course – Teacher Form (ÖSFEDAR) differed significantly according to their years of service at their current school ($F = 3.346$, $p = .039$, $p < .05$). This difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. To identify the source of the difference, a Gabriel post-hoc test was conducted. The results indicated a significant difference between Group 1 (teachers with 1–3 years of service) and Group 2 (teachers with 4–7 years of service) in the Problematic Behaviors sub-dimension. Specifically, teachers who had been working at their current school for 1–3 years reported significantly lower scores ($\bar{X}=2.60$) than those who had been working at the same school for 4–7 years ($\bar{X}=3.38$). This finding suggests that teachers with longer tenure at their current school may be more aware of or more likely to observe problematic behaviors that contribute to peer rejection among students with special educational needs.

Table 8. Results of the Analysis of Differences in Teachers' Levels of Agreement with the Scale Sub-Dimensions According to the Grade Level They Teach

Variables	Group	n	$\bar{X}$	SD	F	P	Scheff e
ÖSFEDAR	Grade 1	20	2,35	0,75	1,419	0,241	
	Grade 2	21	2,19	0,96			
	Grade 3	23	2,68	0,86			
	Grade 4	52	2,31	0,84			
Physical Appearance Sub- dimension	Grade 1	20	1,66	0,72	3,572	0,016 *	
	Grade 2	21	1,90	1,14			

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	Grade 3	23	2,52	0,97			1-3
	Grade 4	52	2,00	0,81			
Speech Skills Sub-dimension	Grade 1	20	1,96	0,79	2,083	0,107	
	Grade 2	21	1,99	0,95			
	Grade 3	23	2,56	0,84			
	Grade 4	52	2,18	0,93			
Problematic Behaviors Sub-dimension	Grade 1	20	3,41	1,33	1,246	0,296	
	Grade 2	21	2,96	1,54			
	Grade 3	23	3,20	1,27			
	Grade 4	52	2,77	1,35			
Social Skills Sub-dimension	Grade 1	20	2,44	0,88	1,525	0,212	
	Grade 2	21	1,94	0,77			
	Grade 3	23	2,47	0,88			
	Grade 4	52	2,28	0,97			
Total		116					
*p< .05							

The scores obtained from the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course (ÖSFEDAR), including the total scale score and the sub-dimensions assessing peer rejection due to physical appearance, speech skills, problematic behaviors, and social skills, were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether they differed according to the grade level currently taught by teachers. The results are presented in Table 8. The findings revealed that teachers' scores on the Physical Appearance Sub-dimension of the Peer Rejection Scale for Play, Sports, and Physical Activities Course – Teacher Form (ÖSFEDAR) differed significantly according to the grade level they taught ($F = 3.572$, $p = .016$, $p < .05$). This difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. To determine the source of the difference, a Scheffé post-hoc test was conducted. The results indicated a significant difference between Group 1 (Grade 1 teachers) and Group 3 (Grade 3 teachers) in the Physical Appearance sub-dimension. Specifically, teachers teaching Grade 1 students reported significantly lower scores ($\bar{X} = 1.66$) than teachers teaching Grade 3 students ($\bar{X} = 2.52$).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the present study, no statistically significant differences were found between teachers' opinions and variables such as age, gender, and marital status. Regarding teachers' age, previous studies have similarly concluded that age does not influence the observation of peer rejection factors among students with special educational needs and their typically developing peers (Tümekaya & Türker, 2010; Soylu et al., 2017; Atmaca et al., 2020; Han et al., 2024). In a study conducted by Jobe et al. (1996) involving 162 teachers, which examined classroom teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, no significant relationship was found between teachers' attitudes and variables such as age, gender, and professional experience. Similarly, Ackah (2010) investigated primary and secondary school teachers' views on inclusive education by administering a 20-item questionnaire to 132 teachers. The findings indicated that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education were not related to variables such as gender, professional experience, or postgraduate education. The study concluded that teachers generally held neutral attitudes toward inclusive education.

In our study, based on teachers' views, a significant difference was found in the problem behaviors sub-dimension of ÖSFEDAR in terms of students' levels of exposure to peer rejection and teachers' total length of service in their current schools. According to the findings, the mean rank of teachers who had been working in their current school for 4–7 years was higher than that of teachers who had been working for 1–3 years. This result indicates that teachers who have worked in the same school for approximately 7 years observe that their students with special needs are exposed to peer rejection more frequently compared to those of teachers with 1–3 years of service in the same school. Based on these findings, it can be suggested that as teachers' length of service in the same school increases, their level of knowledge and observation regarding students' social skills and behaviors also increases. A review of the literature reveals studies supporting our findings (Aktepe, 2004; Kozikoğlu & Senemoğlu, 2018). However, there are also studies reporting different results. In some of these studies (Bozak et al., 2016; Atasoy & Pekel, 2021), it is stated that teachers who have worked in the profession for many years gain experience by working with a large number of students over time and, as a result, may become less sensitive to student behaviors and experience a degree of desensitization. These differences may be attributed to teachers' professional experience and educational background. Ultimately, it is considered important for the development of social competence and the improvement of social skill deficits among students with special needs that the same students engage in educational processes with the same teachers for longer periods.

In our study, it was found that teachers who taught 3rd grade at the primary level, unlike those teaching 1st and 2nd grades, believed that inclusive students were rejected by their peers due to their physical appearance. It can be suggested that as grade level increases, students' criticism regarding their peers' physical appearance becomes more pronounced.

It can also be stated that as the educational level taught by teachers increases, students with special needs are subjected to less peer rejection by their classmates, and as students spend more time in the educational system, their social competence and social skills are positively affected by this process.

In our study, it was concluded that students with special needs who differ in terms of physical appearance compared to typically developing peers are exposed to peer rejection due to these differences, and that students with special needs who exhibit problem behaviors are also rejected by their peers.

Play, sports, and physical activities are powerful mediators in integrating students with special needs into environments with typically developing peers in terms of social interaction. In this respect, physical education, games, and sports activities can play a highly important role in inclusive education by bringing students with special needs together with typically developing peers, thereby supporting the goals of inclusion in special education (Gün & Ilkim, 2020). It is emphasized that even in physical education, games, and sports lessons where students are expected to channel their energy appropriately and gain teamwork and social communication skills—students with special needs may still be exposed to peer rejection. This situation negatively affects social interaction and requires cooperation among various stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, and parents. It is stated that physical education and special education teachers, in particular, should work in coordination to reduce problematic behaviors among students. Furthermore, it is highlighted that lessons should be conducted under closer teacher supervision, and that activities promoting peer interaction and inclusion should be carefully planned.

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